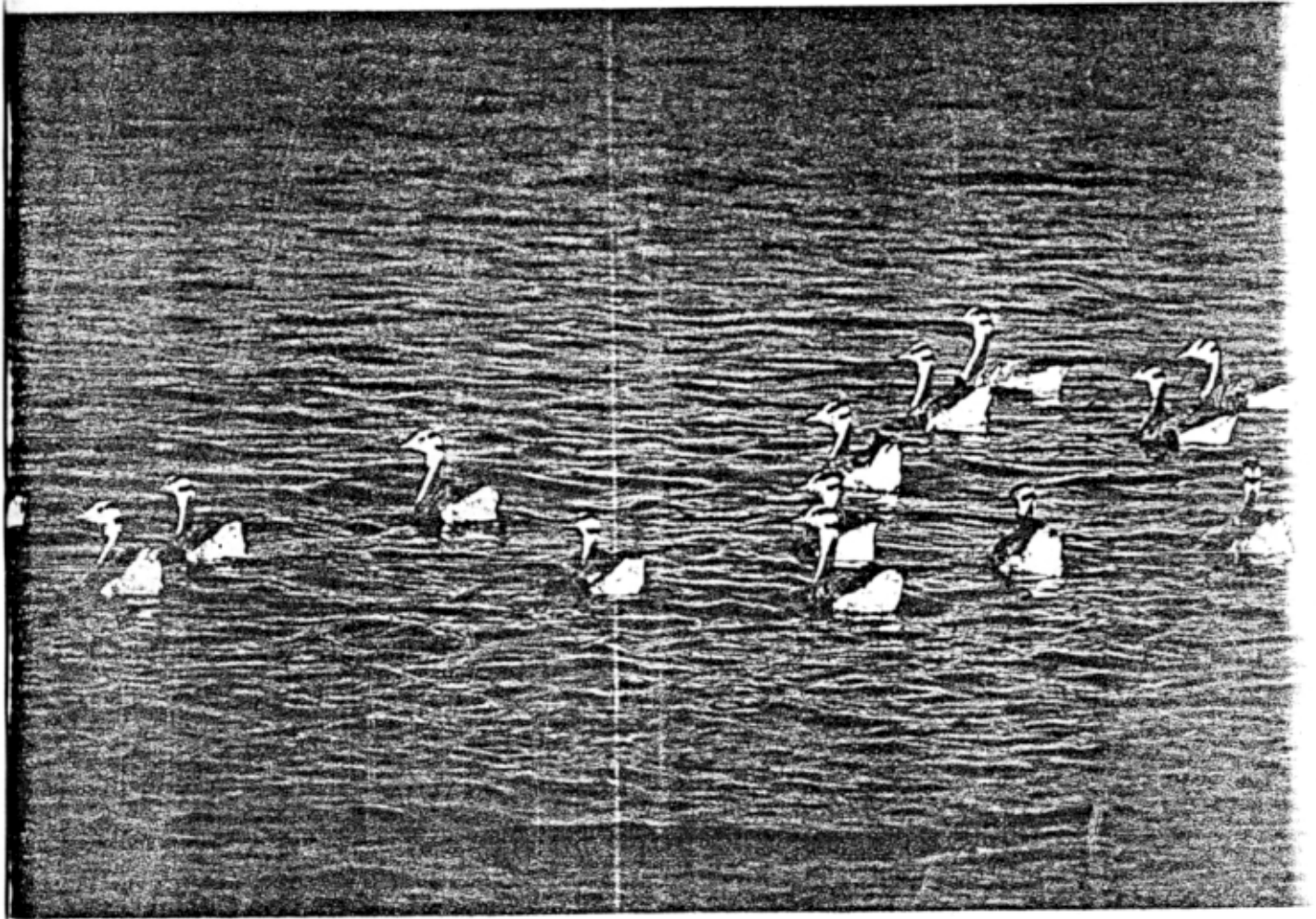


# *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*

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## ■ Editorial

- Birds & Eutrophication
- A Birdwatchers' Handbook
- Eggs of Black-bellied Tern Displayed in Flower Show
- Name dropping



## ■ Articles

- The Edayur Bird Sanctuary, Kalpakkam, by A Rajaram
- Birds of Mudumalai, by Anish P. Andheria
- Black-Necked Storks, Sarus Cranes and Drongo-Cuckoos, by K. S. Gopi Sundar
- Noteworthy Water Birds from Bengal, by Samiran Jha & Subhasish Sengupta
- Sultana Wetland in Thar Desert, by M Zafar-Ul Islam
- Bird Calls, by Lavkumar Khacher
- Polyandry (extract from The Birdwatcher's Handbook)
- Sighting of the White-browed Fantail Flycatcher, by S. Sridhar, Paresh U. Karmarkar, Dr. Venkatesh & Lalu Narayan

## ■ Review

- Birds of the Indian Subcontinent, by Richard Grimmett, Carol Inskipp and Tim Inskipp, by Lavkumar Khacher

## ■ Correspondence

- Birdbanding Camp by Bombay Natural History Society
- Comments on Vol. 39, Issue 3, by Aasheesh Pittie
- Unusual Nests of Sunbird, by H. Daniel Wesley
- Bird Activity in Puttur, by Mrs. Pragati Nayak
- Vanishing House Sparrows, by Sharmila Chavaly
- Web of Death, by Sanjay B Shegaonkar
- Spotted Grey Creeper, by Dr. Rajiv Saxena
- Playful Behaviour by Large Grey Babbler, by Asad R. Rahmani
- Sultan Tit: Some Comments, by S. Karthikeyan
- Sultan Tit in Kerala?, by J Praveen
- Nectar Seeking Woodpecker, by Lima Rosalind
- Vivid Memories, by William C. Selover
- Peregrinations in the sky, by Mark Cocker
- Painted Storks Fly over G.K.V.K. Campus, by S. Sridhar & Dr. A.K. Chakravarthy

## Birds &amp; Eutrophication

In the article on Edayur Bird Sanctuary in this issue the author suggests that guano (bird excrement) enriches the water too much, and the resulting excessive algae, & depleting oxygen leads to the death of the lake. This goes against the general principle of ecology that left to itself nature is self-surviving. It would be useful to have the water analysed to see if synthetic chemicals or anything else has found its way into the water and is responsible for the problem.

**A birdwatcher's handbook - a guide to the natural history of the birds of Britain & Europe, illustrated by Shahid Naeem. OUP, 1994.**

Dr. A. Rajaram, Editor of Blackbuck (Journal of the Madras Naturalists' Society) has my drawn attention to this book. He writes : "I feel that birdwatchers in our country will benefit greatly from a reading of the essays even though the species described are predominantly European". The few pages which he has xeroxed confirm what he says and I reproduce in this issue the piece on Polyandry.

## Eggs of black-bellied tern displayed in flower show in Bangalore

It is extraordinary that eggs of wild birds should have been displayed in the Flower Show held in Lalbaugh, Bangalore in August this year. Since when has oology (the science relating to eggs) become a discipline of Horticulture? And it is scandalous that some of the eggs displayed belong to an endangered species, the black-bellied tern (*Sterna acuticauda*). As early as 1988, Taej Mundkur wrote in the Newsletter (Vol. 28, No. 9&10, page 6&7) under the heading: Time to Pull the Alarm, that the bird was disappearing from its traditional breeding grounds in Saurashtra. More recently, it is seen from the Asian Midwinter Waterfowl Count of 1996 that there are only 237 birds of this species in India, out of which Karnataka has 52. Obviously the strikingly beautiful eggs of this rare bird have been poached from islands between KRS and Ranganthittu, thus hastening the extinction of this bird from Karnataka. I hope the authorities (such as they are) will put an end to the collecting of the eggs of wild birds - a practice which is recognised as disreputable all over the civilised world.

## Name dropping

The changing names, both common and scientific will be a problem for many years-like the changeover from feet and inches to meter and centimetres. I am afraid I am still more at home with Rs. Ans. and pies, and yards, feet, and inches than with their new equivalents.

In Anish Andheria's article p71, he refers to the streak-throated woodpecker. If you have a copy of the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent by Richard Grimmett et al, you will find a description on page 388 with the scientific name *Picus xanthopygaeus*. Since the English name is a new one you will not find it in the old books. So you try and connect with the

scientific name *xanthopygaeus*. You look up the Pictorial Guide and there is no *xanthopygaeus*. You consult the Book of Indian Birds (12th Edition) and the Handbook by Salim Ali and S.D. Ripley, and you find *xanthopygaeus* with its English name scalybellied green woodpecker. Now you can relate with the old books.

What a relief that the next bird mentioned by Andheria is the chestnut bellied nuthatch whose names, common and

scientific have remained unchanged. But the relief is shortlived: there are again new English names. The brown-capped woodpecker (*Picoides nanus*) was the pygmy woodpecker and the grey headed canary flycatcher the grey-headed flycatcher. The rusty-tailed flycatcher was the rufous tailed flycatcher I suggest that wherever advisable, mention the old common names in brackets. It will be a long time before the old names disappear altogether.



## An Update on the Edayur Bird Sanctuary, Kalpakkam

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There is a small bird sanctuary inside the Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research (IGCAR) at Kalpakkam, Tamil nadu. A short note about this place appeared in *Blackbuck* (Ananthakrishna, 1989). This heronry is not mentioned in Subramanya's review of Indian heronries (Subramanya, 1996). Since only a few birdwatchers have visited the place due to the security restrictions, I am describing the place as it was when some of us from the Madras Naturalists' Society visited the place on February 28, '99, after obtaining permission from the Director, IGCAR.

The sanctuary is about 10 km from Mahabalipuram and about 4 km from the Kokkalamedu Gate of the IGCAR. The Edayur lake is really a backwater lagoon close to the sea. It is about 100 m long (North-South) by 30 m wide (East-West). Casuarina trees border the lake and pandanus occurs at the edges along with reed grass. There are hardly any people around and as we approached the lake around 9.30 a.m. we could spot plenty of spotbills in the water. I had counted about a hundred when the whole flock took off sensing our presence. There would have been at least 150 birds in that flock which is a high number for spotbills in Tamil Nadu in such a small tank. The casuarina trees had grey heron (6), painted stork (25), spoonbill (3), openbill stork (4), shag and little cormorant (15), and egrets (all species except large, about 50). Many painted storks were on nests but we couldn't notice eggs or chicks. On our last visit almost ten years ago, we had seen nesting of spotbilled pelicans, but they were missing this time. The surprising sighting was that of about 20 darters especially since subsequently when we went to Vedanthangal (about 50 km to the west), there were only four. [The spotbilled pelican was nesting there at Vedanthangal in fair numbers]. The pandanus brakes had night herons and pond herons sheltering inside. At the edge of the tank, separated from the sea by a short stretch of sand, there were a couple of brown headed gulls.

I recall that there was a problem of eutrophication of this lake when a large number of fish died last year. About this time there was also a discussion about eutrophication of water bodies in NLBW (Editorial Vol. 38, No. 5, '98). The bird guano, rich in nitrates and phosphorus increases the growth of algae and microorganisms which subsequently results in decreasing the available oxygen and sunlight which in turn results in the death of fish and other aquatic life. Possibly the undisturbed nature of the Edayur lake resulted in too high a concentration of birds in the area resulting in too much enrichment of the waters by eutrophication.

In the scrub jungle around, we could see signs of porcupine, blacknaped hare, jungle cat and jackal. The scrub extends upto (and beyond) the Edayur bridge and estuary where a tributary of the Palar joins the sea. From the bridge, in about half an hour, we spotted curlews, whimbrel, golden plovers, green and common sandpipers, greenshanks, little ringed plovers, little stints and a few terns in the distance. From the scrub jungle nearby, we could hear the calls of the brainfever bird, koel, whitebrowed bulbuls, sunbirds and whiteheaded babblers. A small greenbilled malkoha made a brief appearance at the edge of the scrub before scampering away.

Our thanks are due to Dr. V. S. Raghunathan, Materials Sciences Division who took us around and Dr. P. Rodriguez, Director, IGCAR for permission. Dr. Raghunathan mentioned that more cormorants, egrets and darters could be seen at other lagoons inside the campus and also near the staff quarters at Pudupattinam Colony.

### References

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## Birds of Mudumalai National Park, Tamil Nadu - A Two Day Visit to Masinagudi Range

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My interest in the field of Surface-Chemistry brought me to Bangalore for a period of six months and in the process opened up unending opportunities to explore the birding-sites in and around the garden city. And destiny decided to take me to the Mudumalai National Park (245 km. from Bangalore) to a friend's farm-house about 2½ km. from Masinagudi village that falls on the shorter, winding route to Udhagamandalam. Udhagamandalam, better known as Ooty is only about 36 km. from Thappekadu where the forest information center, Mudumalai N.P. is situated. However, the traditional route from Thappekadu to Ooty via Gudalur is twice as long.

Mudumalai N.P. spanning 321 sq.km. and located between 11° 30' & 11° 39' N Lat. and 76° 27' & 76° 43' E Long. in the Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu in the western ghat is more renowned for its bigger wildlife comprising of the Asian Elephant *Elephas maximus*, Gaur *Bos gaurus*, Tiger *Panthera tigris*, Leopard *Panthera pardus*, Sambar *Cervus unicolor*, Chital *Axis axis*, Sloth bear *Melurus ursinus*, and Dhole *Cuon alpinus* than its birdlife. However, the strict restriction imposed on tourism owing to the "Naxalite" problem, ensured that I indulge in some serious bird-watching. The disappointment of

not being able to move into the forest to enjoy its mammalian treasure was more than compensated by the enormous wealth of birds that these blue-mountains had to offer. For the next couple of days, I had to keep the binoculars glued to my eyes to avoid missing-out on any action.

This rich avian diversity can be attributed to the broad vegetation types varying from open thorny scrub to hilltop evergreen forest along with dry and moist deciduous forests that constitute a considerable part of the sanctuary. Moreover, the park has an undulating terrain with low-lying areas like Moyar reserve forest (625 m) to Morganbetta cliffs that rise up to 1260 m above MSL. Apart from such a drastic altitude change, it is also blessed with both north-east and south-west monsoons. The annual rainfall varies from 600 to 2000 mm. The moist deciduous forest supports trees like *Persea macaranga*, *Syzygium cumini*, *Olea dioica*, etc., the dry deciduous stretches harbour *Terminalia tomentosa*, *Shorea roxburghii*, *Tectona grandis*, *Anogeissus latifolia*, *Lagerstroemia parviflora* amongst many others, whereas the scrub consists of *Acacia sundra*, *Erythroxylum monogynum*, *Zizyphus xylocarpus* and *Eriolaena quinquelocularis*. The

### The birds sighted during my stay are as follows :

- |   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| 1 Jungle bush quail <i>Pedicularia asiatica</i>           | 33 Bay-backed shrike <i>Lanius vittatus</i>                    | 65 Dusky crag martin <i>Hirundo concolor</i>                 |
| 2 Red spurfowl <i>Gallus spadicea</i>                     | 34 Rufous-backed shrike <i>Lanius schach</i>                   | 66 Barn swallow <i>Hirundo rustica</i>                       |
| 3 Grey junglefowl <i>Gallus sonnerati</i>                 | 35 House crow <i>Corvus splendens</i>                          | 67 Red-rumped swallow <i>Hirundo daurica</i>                 |
| 4 Common peafowl <i>Pavo cristatus</i>                    | 36 Large-billed crow <i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>               | 68 Red-whiskered bulbul <i>Pycnonotus jocosus</i>            |
| 5 Brown-capped woodpecker <i>Dendrocopos nanus</i>        | 37 Black-headed oriole <i>Oriolus xanthornus</i>               | 69 Red-vented bulbul <i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>                 |
| 6 Streak-throated woodpecker <i>Picus xanthopygaeus</i>   | 38 Large cuckoo shrike <i>Coracina macei</i>                   | 70 Jungle prinia <i>Prinia sylvatica</i>                     |
| 7 Black-rumped flameback <i>Dinopium bengalensis</i>      | 39 Black-headed cuckoo shrike <i>Coracina melanoptera</i>      | 71 Ashy prinia <i>Prinia socialis</i>                        |
| 8 White-rumped woodpecker <i>Chrysocolaptes festivus</i>  | 40 Small minivet <i>Pericrocotus cinnamomeus</i>               | 72 Asian plain prinia <i>Prinia inornata</i>                 |
| 9 Brown-headed barbet <i>Megalaima zeylanica</i>          | 41 White-browed fantail <i>Rhipidura aureola</i>               | 73 Oriental white-eye <i>Zosterops palpebrosa</i>            |
| 10 White-cheeked barbet <i>Megalaima virdis</i>           | 42 Black drongo <i>Dicrurus macrocerus</i>                     | 74 Blyth's reed warbler <i>Acrocephalus dumetorum</i>        |
| 11 Coppersmith barbet <i>Megalaima haemacephala</i>       | 43 Ashy drongo <i>Dicrurus leucophaeus</i>                     | 75 Booted warbler <i>Hippolais caligata</i>                  |
| 12 Malabar pied hornbill <i>Anthraceroceros coronatus</i> | 44 White-bellied drongo <i>Dicrurus caerulescens</i>           | 76 Common tailorbird <i>Orthotomus sutorius</i>              |
| 13 Eurasian hoopoe <i>Upupa epops</i>                     | 45 Bronzed drongo <i>Dicrurus aeneus</i>                       | 77 Eurasian chiffchaff <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>         |
| 14 Indian roller <i>Coracias benghalensis</i>             | 46 Greater racket-tailed drongo <i>Dicrurus paradiseus</i>     | 78 Greenish warbler <i>Phylloscopus trochiloides</i>         |
| 15 White-throated kingfisher <i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>    | 47 Hair-crested drongo <i>Dicrurus hottentotus</i>             | 79 Yellow-eyed babbler <i>Chrysomma sinense</i>              |
| 16 Green bee-eater <i>Merops orientalis</i>               | 48 Asian paradise flycatcher <i>Terpsiphone paradisi</i>       | 80 Yellow-billed babbler <i>Turdoides affinis</i>            |
| 17 Chestnut-headed bee-eater <i>Merops leschenaulti</i>   | 49 Common iora <i>Agithina tibia</i>                           | 81 Pale-billed flowerpecker <i>Dicaeum erythrorhynchos</i>   |
| 18 Asian koel <i>Eudynamis scolopacea</i>                 | 50 Common wood shrike <i>Tephrodornis pondicerianus</i>        | 82 Plain flowerpecker <i>Dicaeum concolor</i>                |
| 19 Greater coucal <i>Centropus sinensis</i>               | 51 Malabar whistling thrush <i>Myophonus horsfieldi</i>        | 83 Thick-billed flowerpecker <i>Dicaeum agile</i>            |
| 20 Plum-headed parakeet <i>Psittacula cyanocephala</i>    | 52 Rusty-tailed flycatcher <i>Muscicapa ruficauda</i>          | 84 Purple-rumped sunbird <i>Nectarinia zeylonica</i>         |
| 21 Malabar parakeet <i>Psittacula columboides</i>         | 53 Asian brown flycatcher <i>Muscicapa dauurica</i>            | 85 Purple sunbird <i>Nectarinia asiatica</i>                 |
| 22 Indian swiftlet <i>Collocalia unicolor</i>             | 54 Verditer flycatcher <i>Eumyias thalassina</i>               | 86 Loten's sunbird <i>Nectarinia lotenia</i>                 |
| 23 Little swift <i>Apus affinis</i>                       | 55 Tickell's blue flycatcher <i>Cyornis tickelliae</i>         | 87 House sparrow <i>Passer domesticus</i>                    |
| 24 Crested treeswift <i>Hemiprocne coronata</i>           | 56 Grey-headed canary flycatcher <i>Culicicapa ceylonensis</i> | 88 Chestnut-shouldered petronia <i>Petronia xanthocollis</i> |
| 25 Spotted dove <i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>             | 57 Oriental magpie robin <i>Copsychus saularis</i>             | 89 Grey wagtail <i>Motacilla cinerea</i>                     |
| 26 Eurasian collared dove <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>    | 58 Indian robin <i>Saxicola fuscata</i>                        | 90 Indian silverbill <i>Lonchura malabarica</i>              |
| 27 Emerald dove <i>Chalcophaps indica</i>                 | 59 Pied bushchat <i>Saxicola caprata</i>                       | 91 White-rumped munia <i>Lonchura striata</i>                |
| 28 Yellow-wattled lapwing <i>Vanellus malabaricus</i>     | 60 Chestnut-bellied myna <i>Sturnus malabaricus</i>            | 92 Black-throated munia <i>Lonchura kelaarti</i>             |
| 29 Red-wattled lapwing <i>Vanellus indicus</i>            | 61 Brahminy myna <i>Sturnus pagodarum</i>                      | 93 Scaly-breasted munia <i>Lonchura punctulata</i>           |
| 30 Black-shouldered kite <i>Elanus caeruleus</i>          | 62 Common myna <i>Acridotheres tristis</i>                     |  |
| 31 Shikra <i>Accipiter badius</i>                         | 63 Jungle myna <i>Acridotheres fuscus</i>                      |  |
| 32 Blue-winged leafbird <i>Chloropsis cochinchinensis</i> | 64 Chestnut-bellied nuthatch <i>Sitta castanea</i>             |  |



mountains also have a variety of *Ficus* spp. which are favoured food plants of a number of frugivores. In addition to this, there is a healthy growth of *Pongamia* spp., *Mangifera indica*, *Schleichera oleosa*, *Dalbergia latifolia* & *Bambusa arundinacea* along the water courses on the mountain slopes, whereas *Lantana* sp., *Glycosmis pentaphylla*, *Eupatorium* sp., etc. form an effective undergrowth capable of supporting a vast array of insectivores. All these natural ingredients join hands to form a unique refuge for innumerable life-forms both big and small.

Another factor that influences such an appreciable biodiversity is its contiguity with other areas like the Bandipur Tiger Reserve (Karnataka) on the north, the Wynad Wildlife Sanctuary (Kerala) on the north-west, Sigur Reserve Forest (Tamil Nadu) towards the east and private coffee and tea estates to the south. That the existing bird-list touches 300 and during a short two day stay, I encountered nearly 100 species exemplifies the biotic wealth that subsists here.

However, in most of the surveyed areas, varying extent of disturbances due to human interference were evident. Vast tracts of both scrub and moist-deciduous forests are flanked by human settlements. There is a never-ending maze of cultivated as well as private farmlands hampering the movement of wildlife across their age-old corridors. Although, this primarily affects the ground-dwelling creatures, birds aren't totally exempted from its ill-effect. Especially the habitat specific species that frequent the moist deciduous forests are at a greater risk than others. The other big threat to the feathered kind is from monoculture farms of Eucalyptus, Silver Oak, Coconut, etc., as could be deciphered from a very poor bird diversity in such areas. To top it all, hundreds of cattle were encountered in the scrub-land, causing great damage to this fragile ecosystem. The villagers treat them as dung producing machines (as they produce virtually no milk). The wild

ungulates not only have to compete for fodder with this ever-bloating fleet of marauders but also combat the deadly foot and mouth disease that can wipe out an entire population in no time.

In spite of all the threats, the wildlife seems to be holding its ground and showering hundreds of enthusiasts like me with captivating sights. During my stay, I covered two different habitat types; one, comprising a partially disturbed scrub forest interspersed with a few moist deciduous trees and the second being a mountain slope covered with bamboo brakes along with moist mixed deciduous forests in the Masinagudi range.

Some of the interesting sightings were that of a streak-throated woodpecker along with a chestnut-bellied nuthatch, searching for insect larvae on a dead tree, a pair of brown-capped woodpeckers moving inconspicuously on a mango tree by the side of a motorable road, a pair of Malabar pied hornbills with their unmistakable white tail flanks amidst an undisturbed bamboo thicket near a stream, a grey-headed canary flycatcher and a rusty-tailed flycatcher, both in a dense forest patch adjacent to a stream and a pair of crested treeswifts involved in copulation.

The most astounding of them all was a fleeting glimpse of a hair-crested drongo with a distinctive inward twist at the tail-tip and a much bulkier body compared to the black drongo. It had a much more glistening back than its raked-tailed cousin. I would request all the readers to look out for this bird in particular, as very little is known about its distribution below Maharashtra, where it is sighted during the flowering season of *Bombax* (Silk cotton) tree.

Readers would be astonished at the absence of any wader or heron, but this was largely due to the absence of any sizable water reservoir in the areas visited.



## Black-necked Storks, Sarus Cranes and Drongo Cuckoos

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Black-necked storks *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*, an endangered species, is found widely dispersed and mostly as single birds or pairs. In the words of Elliott (1992), the storks are "... basically sedentary, probably sticking to recognized feeding territories; young birds stay with adults for considerable time. In the dry season in Irian Jaya (Western New Guinea) many birds seem to cluster together at last remaining flooded areas". In India, these birds have never been seen in "flocks" anywhere (pers. obs., Asad Rahmani pers. comm.).

With this background in mind, it was an astonishing sight that presented itself in Patna Jheel in Etah district of Uttar Pradesh. On June 22, 1999, myself, accompanied by my colleagues Jatinder and Rajeev Chouhan, reached the Jheel (1000h) to verify a report of a large flock of roosting sarus cranes *Grus antigone*. Whilst we counted 120 sarus cranes, 100+ black-tailed godwits, about 200+ lesser whistling teals and several purple moorhens and dabchicks, the treat was a

large number of black-necked storks. I counted ten birds of which four were sub-adults. They were dispersed all over the jheel. In the past two visits to the jheel in June 1998 and again in January 1999, I have counted a couple of black-necked storks and sarus cranes here but this was the first time so many birds of the two species were seen. On 23 June 1999, B.C. Choudhury (Scientist W.I.I., pers. comm.) counted 15 individuals of the black-necked stork, of which eight were subadults. Interestingly, he saw only a dozen sarus cranes at about 1130 h and about 58 sarus along the roads in the district enroute to Aligarh.

This time of the year, all the wetlands in the area are dry leaving only a few deep and appropriately protected places with substantial water for water birds to forage in. This observation of flocking of black-necked storks is perhaps useful in the sense that future counts of the species could be undertaken in the dry season in perennial wetlands in its distribution range.

This would hold good for similar large-bodied wetland species such as the sarus crane as we saw for ourselves. The previous day, we had visited the Saman Jheel in Etawah district, U.P. to look for flocking sarus that I had seen during a previous survey to locate sarus populated areas. This time, I counted a large flock of 166 sarus. This habit of the sarus flocking in wetlands during the dry season has been observed before by Dr. Rahmani (pers. comm.), who informed me that he once counted upto 400 individuals roosting in a wetland near Aligarh. These birds started coming to the wetland in the early evening hours and the population peaked as night fell.

#### Acknowledgements :

These visits were made possible under the "Sarus Crane Count - 1999" programme organized by W.I.I. and I am grateful to Mr. S.K. Mukherjee, Director and Mr. B.C. Choudhury, Scientist for providing the necessary infrastructure; Dr. Asad Rahmani for providing useful information and Jatinder and Rajeev for accompanying me.

#### Reference :

Elliott, A. 1992. Family CICONIIDAE (Storks). in del Hoyo, J., Elliott, A. & Sargatal, J. (eds.) 1992. *Handbook of the Birds of the World*. Vol. I. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.



The drongo-cuckoo *Surniculus lugubris* is very similar in appearance to the black drongo *Dicrurus adsimilis* but can be readily distinguished by its call. We had an opportunity to observe closely the calling behaviour of a pair of these birds during a walk in a sal forest near our institute. Both birds

alighted on a dead tree, one above the other. The bird on the top sat upright and initiated the calling with a shrill *pee-pee-pee-pee-pee-pee* increasing in pitch. The bird alternated between six and seven notes, occasionally going up to eight notes. Simultaneously, the bird on the branch below called with a soft but loud *chirr-chirr-chirr* emitted continuously. The latter call was accompanied by the wagging of the bird's hindquarters, raising and shaking of both wings while sitting in a horizontal position. The two birds then exchanged their positions on the tree and their calls as well. They repeated this performance several times until one of the birds flew off followed closely by its partner and was lost to view. There is no sexual dimorphism in the species and the birds were assumed to be a breeding pair.

Wright (1957) has made the first reference to the call of the drongo-cuckoo and describes it as a "seemingly endless repetition" of 5 or 6 notes in an ascending scale and another call which is akin to a shrill version of the beginning of the call of the common hawk cuckoo but without the "brain-fever" bit. She also points out that the latter call was often accompanied by lifting of both wings to touch above the back. We could find no other reference to the duetting of the drongo-cuckoo in literature. Have other bird watchers observed the species duetting?

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Wright, M.D. 1957. Notes on the birds of a select area of Dehradun (June 1946 to July 1951). *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 54 (3) : 627-662.



## Some Noteworthy Waterbirds from Bengal

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As in previous years this year too (1999) we participated in the Midwinter Asian Waterfowl Census, in 9 sites of central and northern West Bengal (Districts of Malda, Murshidabad, North and South Dinajpur). We refer to some species which are not too common in this region.

#### 1) Great crested grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*)

On 17th January 1999, we were searching for a large flock of greylag geese (*Anser indicus*), which we had sighted a few days ago in Farakka Barrage in Malda district. As we were walking along the southern embankment, we spotted a single bird which we were not familiar with. We identified it as a great crested grebe, and walking further west we found another 3 individuals. Perhaps great crested grebes are spreading in West Bengal. It was recorded only 20 years ago in Southern Bengal (K. Mukherjee, 1999) and now it is in Northern Bengal.

#### 2) Oriental darter (*Anhinga rufa*)

On 25th December 1998, we spotted a single oriental darter in Bara Sagardighi Fisheries which is only 4 km from

Malda Town. It is the largest fresh water fisheries in West Bengal (1.47 km long and 1 km width) and owned by Govt. of W.B. This wetland attracts a large number of water fowl due to protection provided by the Authority. On 1st January 1999, we were again there and were surprised to find 3 darters. On our 3rd visit on 15th January we counted 15 darters which is perhaps the largest assemblage of darters in West Bengal in recent times. However on our next visit in February 10, even after a thorough search we were not able to spot a single darter.

Kaushik Deuti reports (NLBW Vol. 37, Page 68, 1997) sightings of only 20 darters in 5 Wetlands in a span of 8 years, so the sighting of 15 darters from a single site is noteworthy. However we are not fully in agreement with the findings of AWB (now Wetlands International). We were advised by our regional co-ordinator to count only in those Wetlands where the population of waterfowl is more than 1000. But darters are likely to occur in wetlands where population of waterfowl is less than one thousand. The results of a few selected Wetlands cannot represent the true picture of West Bengal.

### 3) White ibis (*Threskiornis aethiopica*)

Though this species is common in other parts of the country, they are rarely seen in West Bengal. A few individuals have been sighted in southern Bengal. On 7th January, 1999, we were walking along the Chander More, a road side wetland in Murshidabad District. Suddenly we saw three birds landing in a small islet, in the midst of the Wetland. We identified them as white ibis. They joined a large flock of openbill stork (*Anastomus oscitans*) and large egret (*Egretta alba*).

### 4) Purple heron (*Ardea purpurea*)

Previously we found this species to be less common in Northern Bengal, but this year we have seen them in five sites with a total of 15 individuals.

### 5) Greylag goose (*Anser anser*)

Barheaded goose (*Anser indicus*) was very common in this region only 20 years ago, but their population has drastically fallen and are now rarely seen only in small flocks. However over the years the population of greylag goose has increased and this year we have seen around 300+ greylag geese in Farakka Barrage.

### 6) Great black-headed gull (*Larus ichthyæetus*)

While we were watching birds in Farakka Barrage, we saw some large gulls flying over the Iron Bridge. As it is a restricted area we were not allowed to watch birds while walking on the bridge. From our observation we find it similar to black-headed gulls but distinctly larger, with a yellowish bill instead of the red of black-headed gulls. Easy comparison was possible due to

the presence of a few black-headed gulls on the site. We think they are great black-headed gulls, but we are not 100% sure.

Apart from these species, we found some others which are spreading in the region. These include shoveller (*Anas clypeata*) previously less common but now found in thousands. Coot (*Fulica atra*) and Indian moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) very few only five years ago, but now found in hundreds. We also found that the number of bluethroat (*Erithacus svecicus*), though not a wetland species but more commonly met with near water bodies, has increased. Unfortunately the number of common pochards (*Aythya ferina*) has fallen drastically. These were common in Farakka Barrage and were found in thousands.

We found that Farakka Barrage is the single most important site of assemblage of waterfowl in Central and Northern Bengal. The Farakka Barrage and the 20 km. upstream of river Ganga attracts at least 100,000 migratory waterfowl, of which 25000-30000 are tufted ducks, besides 8 to 10 highly endangered gangetic dolphin (*Platanista gangetica*). The Bara Sagardighi is also becoming a good waterfowl site and this year we have recorded 9000 ducks.

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## Sultàna Wetland in the Thar Desert

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It is strange to write about wetlands in the Thar Desert and many people will be surprised that some of the most productive wetlands are present in the desert. For example, the Sambhar Lake in Ajmer district and Chhari Dhand in the Rann of Kutch both in the Thar desert. In the old days, local communities in the Thar desert had an elaborate system of conserving water in *cisterns*, *tankas* and small reservoirs. There were seven reservoirs where drinking water was stored, at times for the whole year, around Jaisalmer district of Rajasthan. However, since the building of the Indira Gandhi Nahar Project (IGNP) many of these waterbodies have been neglected while at the same time large wetlands have developed along the canal due to water seepage.

One of the most interesting seepage wetlands is near Sultàna village (27° 25' 21 North and 71° 00' 31 East) in Ramgarh Tehsil of Jaisalmer. When I visited the Thar desert in 1997 to study the socio-economic aspects of people of the Thar under the Biodiversity Conservation Prioritization Project (BCPP), I was told in Ramgarh about the Sultàna wetland which had come up due to the seepage of the IGNP. However, I again visited the site in February 1999, along with a team of

four persons, Dr. A.R. Rahmani (Director, BNHS), Dr. Ravi Sankaran (SACON) and Mr. Manoj Kulshreshtha from Jaipur to publicize the plight of the great Indian bustard and seek villagers' cooperation in saving this endangered species.

On 7th February 1999, we started our survey of some remote villages in the Ramgarh tehsil. Here I sighted many big birds flying at a distance, which I thought to be great Indian bustards. When the birds came closer, I realized they were common cranes. Further, we saw many other birds landing in the distance. As we moved towards Nerai village, we saw simmering water in the distance, which we thought was a mirage. On closer approach, we realized that it was a large waterbody with thousands of waterbirds. This wetland came into existence ten years ago, when the IGNP released water in this area. A leakage from RD13 (Reduced Distance) from the canal, flows into this wetland like a continuous stream of water flowing in the desert. Regular inputs from this leakage is responsible for the increasing size of this wetland.

The Sultàna wetland is surrounded by three villages : Sultàna in the north, Diga in the west and RD13 and Chaupan (RD bridge) in the east and is about 10 sq. km. The wetland is

surrounded by small sand dunes and *magra* (hard rock) from two sides. Reeds are spread all around the wetland. At the edge, the wetland is covered with aquatic vegetation such as *Typha angustata*, *Arundo donax*, *Imperata cylindrica*, and *Saccharum spontaneum*. There are many Khejri (*Prosopis cineraria*) trees, the state tree of Rajasthan, 100 meters from the wetland.

The wetland is well connected by roads. It is 70 km from Jaisalmer city, 40 km from Mohangarh, about 60 km from Ramgarh, and 5 km from Arujuna village in the west. It is about 40 km from the Pakistan border. Because of its closeness to the border, wetland can be protected easily and may be declared as an important site for the birds.

Prior to the establishment of the wetland, people used the land for livestock grazing, now the wetland water is used for irrigation and growing cash crops, such as wheat, mustard, taara meera, guar and bajra. Agricultural activities progress undisturbed due to the availability of water throughout the year. There is now a brick kiln, as the moisture in the soil makes it possible to dig deep and procure soil for making bricks.

Thousands of waterbirds were present in the wetland, including pintail, mallard, gadwall, common teal, coot, glossy ibis, little stint, grey wagtail, demoiselle crane and common crane. Hundreds of geese were also seen, but because of the tall grass on the fringe of the wetland, we could not count the number of birds present.



It is surprising how many otherwise knowledgeable birdwatchers tend to be casual about bird calls. This casualness makes them overlook so very many birds in the neighbourhood. This fact was strikingly brought to my notice in my own case and even though I am aware of bird calls to a degree that all my birding friends are surprised. As a matter of fact, quite whole groups of species can best be identified by their very distinctive calls as for example the barbets, the nightjars, the owls and the cuckoos. Those terribly confusing group among birds, the warblers, too are well known to have very distinctive calls. Birds make their presence known to their own kind by sound and except in a very few, less by visibility. In fact, for a great many, being visible is to be placed in danger.

For years, I had been hearing a pleasant bulbul-like "tchee-cheu, chyeu-chyu-chu-chu" in my Vashishta orchard throughout the day and had attributed the call to the several white-eared bulbuls in the area. It was only a couple of days back that I discovered that this call was that of three male paradise flycatchers of which two are white and one chestnut. I know there are three of these exquisite birds in addition to the females because I have seen all three together on several occasions "dive bombing" jungle crows. During the

There are other such seepage wetlands in this area. These wetlands play a major role in the crop pattern. Pearl Millet, Moong, Moth, Gauar and Til were major crops in the Thar region, but after the availability of water from the IGNP, people have started growing cash crops, such as rice, sugarcane, wheat, groundnut and cotton.

The biodiversity of the area has increased because of the creation of such wetlands, so also the increasing pressure of hunting, overgrazing and illegal tree cutting. Easy access by road has increased hunting of the water birds by locals and visitors. Waterbirds and the houbara bustard are greatly threatened. The great indian bustard (GIB) may join the list soon. Many people were not aware that it is the State Bird of Rajasthan. We told them that a very low population of bustard is left in the whole world and 75% population is in Rajasthan.

The population of Nilgai and Wild Boar are increasing rapidly in the area, as abundant food is now available due to regular water supply. The animals have now become pests for the locals as they destroy entire fields.

If wetlands like Sultana are given protection, they will help people of the Thar to grow cash crops which will improve the standard of living. Wetlands also help in checking further desertification. I hope that the Rajasthan Government will take the necessary stand to protect the Sultana wetland for the long term interest of the region.



## Importance of Bird Calls for Identification

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attacks only the harsh well known "trachh" is uttered but it was on a lovely, picture postcard perfect morning that I had three flycatcher fledgelings newly out of their nest huddled together on a branch of a tree edging my front garden and the white male was coming and attending to them. His exuberance was overflowing in song as he frequently perched on a nearby conifer or swept into an apple tree. It was then I realised that what I had thought were calls of bulbuls, were the song of a bird which has to my mind never been credited with any distinctive utterance other than the harsh call.

While on the subject of the paradise flycatcher, I may mention that during a couple of summers I have seen a male with a black head, white body and long chestnut tail streamers. Very beautiful but alas, it would seem a transitory phase as the young chestnut male moults into full adult finery.

To conclude, I would strongly advise fellow birdwatchers to concentrate to a greater degree on bird calls as then, they may be led to new arrivals long, long before ever seeing the intruders! Instead of watching birds, one would be advised to become aware of them - birds more so than any other life form are audio-visual treats.







The mating of one female with more than one male while each male mates with only one female is known as polyandry (literally, 'many males'). It is a rare mating system, occurring in less than one per cent of all bird species, and is found mostly in waders. Polyandry is often accompanied by a reversal of sexual roles in which males perform all or most parental duties and females compete for mates. The common pattern of sexual dimorphism is often reversed in polyandrous birds: the female is often larger and more colourful than the male. This reversal confused early biologists and led Audubon to mislabel males and females in all his phalarope plates, and caused Gould to reverse male and female in his grey Phalarope plate.

Two types of polyandry have been documented: simultaneous polyandry and sequential polyandry. The Dunnock often shows simultaneous polyandry in which two males associate with the same female in the same breeding territory. One male is dominant over the other, but the subordinate male often manages to mate with the female despite strenuous efforts of the dominant male to prevent it. If subordinate males manage to mate, they then help to feed the young. If they don't mate, they don't help.

In another form of simultaneous polyandry, each female holds a large territory containing the smaller nesting territories of two or more males who care for the eggs and tend the young. Northern Jacanas (*Jacana spinosa*, a New World 'lily-trotter') characteristically practise this form of polyandry. Females may mate with all their consorts in one day and provide each male with help in defending his territory. A female will not copulate with a mate while their eggs are being incubated or during the first six weeks of the life of the chicks. If a clutch is lost, she will quickly copulate with the broodless male and lay a new batch of eggs within a few days.

A variation on the preceding theme is 'cooperative simultaneous polyandry', in which more than one male mates with a single female and the single clutch of mixed parentage is reared cooperatively by the female and her several mates. This arrangement occurs in Galapagos hawks (*Buteo galapagoensis*), some populations of North American Harris' hawks (*Parabuteo unicinctus*), (occasionally) in Acorn Woodpecker (*Melanerpes formicivorus*) groups, and (in the form of trios) has recently appeared as a common mating system in threatened populations of bearded vultures in the Pyrenees. In the last, shortage of prime territories for males

## Polyandry

(Extract from *The Birdwatcher's Handbook*)

may have made the behaviour advantageous, improving the reproductive output of all participants.

In sequential polyandry (the most typical form of this mating system), a female mates with a male, lays eggs, and then terminates the relationship with that male, leaving him to incubate the eggs while she goes off to repeat this sequence with another male. Red-necked and grey phalaropes are examples of sequentially polyandrous species. A possible evolutionary precursor of sequential polyandry is found in Temminck's stint, little stint, and sanderling. In these species, each female lays a clutch of eggs that is incubated by the male, followed by a second clutch that she incubates herself. These two-clutch systems can be envisioned as a step toward the sort of sequential polyandry seen in the American spotted sandpiper (*Actitis macularia*), but females of that species never incubate a clutch alone unless their mate is killed, even when resources are abundant. A two-clutch system is seen in captive red-legged partridge, but it is suspected that females of this species may lay clutches for several males in the wild.

Sometimes polyandry and polygyny exist side-by-side. Tengmalm's owl is often polygynous, but biandry (one female mated to two males) is also known for this species, in which the male does most of the caring for the young.

There is an interesting sidelight to the story of polyandry in birds. In polygynous mammals (one male mating with several females) such as lions and gorillas, infanticide can occur when a new male takes over a harem. By killing the young of the previous harem ruler, the new male presumably brings females back into heat. This gives him a chance to increase his own reproductive contributions and, perhaps, to reduce use of resources by un-related offspring. Similar behaviour, in which males induce females to breed sooner by killing their chicks, almost certainly occurs in house sparrows and swallows. In Northern jacanas, field experiments indicate that females taking over the territories of other females often practise infanticide, destroying the offspring of previous females. The males attempt to defend their broods (which represent their genes, and those of the old, but not the new, female), just as lionesses attempt to defend their cubs from infanticidal male lions taking over a pride. This behaviour in jacanas is the first known example of infanticide being used as a reproductive strategy by female birds.





## Sighting of the White Browed Fantail Flycatcher at Arekoppa Forest, Kanakapura

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While returning from a fact-finding mission to ascertain the causes of the death of three wild elephants at Arekoppa forest (12° 18'N & 77° 29'E), in Muguru Reserve Forest area situated about 80 kms south east of Bangalore, we saw a fantail flycatcher flit from the nearby bushes and land on the path leading to the Arekoppa village. It was incessantly fanning its tail and turning from side to side. It had a broad white brow and two white streaks on its wings and at once we realised it was the white browed fantail flycatcher (*Rhipidura aureola*) and not the white spotted fantail flycatcher (*Rhipidura albicollis albogularis*). We have been studying the breeding behaviour of the white spotted fantail flycatcher since 1986, in a forest patch about 50 kms southwest of Bangalore.

This flycatcher had a white brow, white forehead and white underparts and two rows of white spots on the wings which were diagnostic. The black throat, the white breast and the white belly also helped us in its identification. All but the central tail feathers were tipped with white, progressing more broadly outwards and the outermost feather was almost entirely white.

The bird was videographed by us from a close range and the salient features were reconfirmed after reviewing the tapes.

It had the similar habit to the white spotted fantail flycatcher; frequenting the lower bushes and undergrowth, usually near the ground and often descending to the ground.

We would have certainly missed this bird but for the grazing cattle and goats which were returning to the village from the forest, and a pair of these beautiful flycatchers had come to catch the insects disturbed by the goats and cattle.

Its call was heard only once which was a delightful clear whistle of 3 or 4 notes, and was stopped abruptly in the middle scale and left unfinished, as mentioned in the *Handbook of Birds of India and Pakistan*.

Incidentally this is the third sighting of this bird since 1977 in and around Bangalore. First it was sighted on 2nd December 1984 at Bannerghatta National Park by Dr. S. Subramanya and later on 9th September 1990 at Badamanavarthi State Forest by J.N. Prasad, S. Karthikeyan and U. Harish Kumar. The earlier two sightings were also reported from the forests of Kanakapura and adjoining areas. We sighted this bird at Arekoppa on 8th September 1999.

The Muguru Reserve Forest has an extent of 22,000 hectares with deep ravines and hills surrounding them. Elephants, Leopards and Spotted Deer have been reported from this forest which is adjoining the Tamil Nadu side with Denkinakota and Dharmapuri Reserve Forests to the west and Chikkalur and Madeshwara Reserve Forest towards the south along the river Cauvery, near Sangam and Mekedatu.

The sighting of the flycatchers was immediately succeeded by a rewarding glimpse of five spotted deer that crossed the path, just ahead of us, in rapid sprints.

We also saw four flocks of large grey babblers (*Turdoides malcolmi*) in the outskirts of this forest. One flock had as many as fifteen individuals.

Earlier in the day, on our way to Kanakapura, we had watched 34 openbilled storks (*Anastomus oscitans*) at Hosagabadi Tank near Harohalli.

The Muguru Reserve Forest holds good promise for birdwatchers. To reach this forest, travel to Kanakapura and take the Kodihalli road to the left, and proceed towards Arekoppa via Kotekoppa. The last 10 kms stretch is not paved. Permission may be obtained from the RFO at Kanakapura before entering this forest.



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## REVIEW

**BIRDS OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT** (CHRISTOPHER HELM, London, Published in 1998)- RICHARD GRIMMET, CAROL INSKIP<sup>1</sup> and TIM INSKIP, reviewed by LAVKUMAR KHACHER

I have just been left a rather bulky volume of *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* by Richard Grimmet and the Inskips. At first glance one feels like purchasing it despite the Rs. 2000/- plus since the illustrations are far superior to any of the earlier books but, as one sits down to browse through the illustrations, and then the text with the maps, one begins to have nagging doubts. For instance, the illustrations of gulls and terns are thoroughly confusing. Those of the raptors are no better! Plate III mynas is worth looking at critically - the jungle myna looks as large if not slightly bulkier than the common myna, whereas the living birds are quite the contrary - the jungle myna is distinctly smaller and a very trim bird. Who can identify the illustrated warblers from the plates? and, the pipits - the illustrations add greater confusion to an already confusing group! Plate 152 has for example the house (*striolated*) bunting looking nothing like the original. In trying to be helpful by showing essentially confusing birds in variable colour phases merely makes for greater confusion.

As for the distribution maps, we would need a lens; for any other indications than those shown by the solid black - for all practical purposes they are useless! Also, distributions in a couple of glaring examples are wrong eg. rain quail (page 350) is absent from much of Gujarat! The grey drongo (page 610) is apparently absent from Kachch, Saurashtra and North Gujarat! It is a regular winter visitor. Perhaps I could go on in this vein, but I must not be a spoil sport since it is a book which would look well on any bookshelf. Frankly, I am hesitant to spend that much money since I certainly do not need to get confused with the new names, and, in any case, I do not think such books are needed for birdwatching. If they were, I would never have been a birdwatcher - even Salim Ali had not published when I started realising that there are different types of doves and that certain species came in winter. The main thing is to look at common birds, and go regularly bird watching. Bird books are indeed helpful but to my thinking only so after one has developed an instinct for the birds. For all new comers I would recommend Hugh Whistler's well written book and of course Salim Ali's *Book of Indian Birds* 1st edition. The book in review is more for tourists making a quick visit to the subcontinent but they must be strong in bird identification. The novice is best advised to spend the money on a really good pair of field glasses instead, and carry a lighter field guide and oh yes! Nothing can replace a good "Guru". I had Dharmakumarsiraji to get familiar with shore birds and Horace Alexander with warblers.



## CORRESPONDENCE

**BIRD BANDING TRAINING PROGRAMME.**  
Dr. S. BALACHANDRAN, Scientist, Bombay Natural History Society, Hornbill House, Dr. Salim Ali Chowk, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Road, Mumbai 400 023

One of the important field activities of the BNHS is bird banding, that provides vital information on the migration patterns of birds, their routes, breeding sites etc. In the past four decades BNHS has ringed about five lakhs birds at various parts of India, but the recovery rate is very low (1%). One of the reasons for the low recovery is due to limited bird banding field stations and lack of trained persons to handle bird banding camps. Thus with a view to expand its ringing programme to several parts of the country, the BNHS is offering an opportunity to volunteers to learn bird banding.

The twenty days rigorous programme includes field techniques for catching by mistnets, clap trap, nooses etc. and ringing birds, their identification, ageing birds, moult study and keeping data sheets. Participants completing the programme successfully will be issued a certificate. The programme is educative and provides enough opportunity to trap, remove birds from mist nets and ring them under supervision. At the end of the programme the participants would become knowledgeable, confident and competent to identify and ring birds. Specially competent and interested persons would be considered for further training camps to attain required level of proficiency in ringing. Among them a few people may be permitted, based on their performance, to ring birds independently on behalf of the BNHS after attaining necessary trapping permission from the forest department.

## Objectives

a. To give training to suitable persons in bird trapping, safe handling of trapped birds, identification, ringing, taking accurate measurements of birds and maintaining data sheets.

b. Train participants in conducting bird census.

**Duration :** 20 days. Participants are permitted to complete the course in two sessions of ten days each.

**Cost :** The registration fee for a twenty day camp is Rs. 1000/- inclusive of training materials and rings. Those who want to participate in two sessions of 10 days have to pay Rs. 1500/-. Boarding and lodging charges have to be paid at the field station which will vary from place to place, but will not exceed Rs. 100/- per day (except for the Andamans, which will be worked out and intimated in advance). Registration fee for members who participated in earlier camps will be Rs. 500/- for each ten day session. For student members 50% concession will be provided in the registration fee.

To make advance arrangements members are requested to register their name well in advance i.e., one week before the commencing date (see the programme) of the respective camps.

## Administration

a. **Attendance :** Full attendance during the entire period of the course is compulsory. Late arrivals and early departure from the camp will not be permitted. Participation certificates will be issued only for persons with the minimum of 20 days attendance.

**b. Preparation :** Participants are advised to read and familiarise themselves with the bird banding manuals which will be sent after enrolling their names. Pictorial Guide to the birds of the Indian Subcontinent by Salim Ali & Dillon Ripley and other books will be available at the camp. They are also requested to bring other field guides for identification if they have any.

Each participant is requested to give a 30 minutes illustrated talk on any ornithological subject (not compulsory). Required charts, maps, sketches, slides etc. to be brought by the participants.

**c. Travel :** Participants have to make own arrangements to reach the training centre. Travel to the field sites will be taken care of by the organisers (except for the Andamans for which they have to share the local ferry fares to move between the islands).

**d. Clothing :** Dull coloured clothes including cap are preferable. Bedding, preferably sleeping bag. Hard foot wear and canvas shoes.

**e. Equipment :** As the camp will have only a few binoculars it would be very helpful to the participants if they have their own binoculars and torch light.

**f. Fieldwork :** Participants have to undertake hard field work such as carrying poles to the netting sites, fixing poles and periodical checking of nets. They should be willing to go to field during night hours for bird trapping along with the bird trappers.

**g. Medical :** Participants are advised to take anti-tetanus, anti-typhoid and anti-cholera injections before coming to the camp. Essential medicines for diseases such as diarrhoea, malaria may be brought with them.

**h. Tests :** To evaluate the progress made by the participants tests on theory and practicals, as well as quizzes will be conducted every week.

#### Details of Lectures During the Training

Introduction	2	Bird Identification	2
Rings and fittings	1	Data analysis	2
Trapping methods	1	By participants	5
Bird census	2	By other experts	2
Migration	2	Film shows	3
Plumage and moult	1		

#### Bird Banding Training Programme for 1999-2000

##### Season

23.08.1999 to 02.09.1999	: Tirupati Hills (Andhra Pradesh)
03.09.1999 to 12.09.1999	: Pulicat Lake (Andhra Pradesh)
20.09.1999 to 29.09.1999	: Gir/Nalsarovar (Gujarat)
08.10.1999 to 17.10.1999	: Point Calimere (Tamil Nadu)
20.10.1999 to 29.10.1999	: Parambikulam (Kerala)
15.11.1999 to 24.11.1999	: Kabartal, Bihar
26.11.1999 to 05.12.1999	: Assam (site to be selected)
22.12.1999 to 31.12.1999	: Point Calimere
10.02.2000 to 05.03.2000	: Andamans
20.03.2000 to 29.03.2000	: Point Calimere
31.03.2000 to 09.04.2000	: Tirupati

For further details contact Dr. S. Balachandran, Scientist, BNHS



COMMENTS ON VOLUME 39 NO 3 (MAY/JUNE 1999) OF NEWSLETTER. AASHEESH PITTIE, 8-2-545, "Prem Parvat", Road No. 7, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500 034

- 1 Why was the roller, a horizontally perching bird made to stand on its tail, woodpeckeresque — on the cover? It could have easily been printed horizontally, both picture size and paper size remaining the same!
- 2 I wonder if AMK Bharos chose the newspaper under the large grey babblers. Your attention is drawn to the headlines in the upper right hand corner of the newspaper. "His cry for help fell on deaf ears"! Coincidence?
- 3 For the benefit of readers, Zafar-ul Islam (p.45-46) should define various terms ("significant numbers", etc.) he's used and enumerate the species in various categories (critical, endangered, etc.), in a future issue of the Newsletter. He has also not given the full citation of "Rose and Scott (1997)".
- 4 Authors should be advised to mention the specific site of an observation in the text of their note. Job K. Joseph's (p.50) "in my backyard" and Geetha Nayak's (p.52) "in our garden" isn't useful at all, even if a postal address is given against their name at the top. The author could be at camp or the observation from somewhere else. This happens now and then in the Newsletter and should be discouraged.
- 5 Ravishanker Kanoje (p.52-53) omits the full citation of "Saxena (1988)".

Photographer's reply to roller's picture:- The roller pair perched horizontally and took turns to enter their nest; a natural cavity on the side of a tree. The orientation of the photo is correct and not otherwise as suggested by Mr. Pittie.



UNUSUAL NESTING SITES OF SUNBIRDS. H DANIEL WESLEY, 126, Ramalinga Nagar South, Tiruchirappalli 620 017

The account (NLBW 39(3): 45) on the nesting sites of the purple sunbirds (*Nectarinia asiatica*) gives an interesting example of "(live)educational" exhibition. It is exemplary that the nest had not been destroyed by the enthusiastic visitors or by urchins. George J (1957), Munidasa (1969) and Rahmani, AR & Sankaran (1990) have observed nests on unusual sites. On 4 February 1996, as my wife and children were waiting for the town bus at Palayamkottai (8.7°N 77.7°E) a purple sunbird was making a nest, then half finished, depending from a loose electric wire high up on the pole on the roadside. Recently, on 5 March 1999 I observed a bird initiating a nest on an electric wire at the entrance to the Parambikulam bridge, (10.4° N 76.8°E). More recently on 26 November 1997 a nest with two eggs was located in a barbed wire fence at Nagercoil (8.2°N 77.4°E).

It is not a habit exclusive to the purple sunbird. The other two common species, *N. zeylanica* and *N. lotenia* exhibit



similar behaviour. Years ago as I was examining the students for their practical skill in Zoology at the Raja Serfoji College, Thanjavur (10.8°N 79.1°E), a purple-rumped sunbird was hanging her nest from an electric wire hanging loose from the ceiling over the veranda of the laboratory, unmindful of the human throng. Perhaps the bird considered it safer to have it there from the roaming rhesus monkeys around the building.

In the Bharathidasan University campus (10.6°N 78.7°E) a loten's sunbird made its nest, similar in general to that of the purple sunbird, hung low from the guy-wire of an electric post behind a faculty building. The nest had grass growing around the pillar that hid it from others view. Another established a nest near my house on a barbed-wire fence infested with spiders.

Apparently, the three species of sunbirds pre-empt any site that offers protection from predators, provided the nest is capable of being suspended. Logically, the three species share gene(s) that confer this ability. Moreover, the disguising of the nest is a common habit, the materials used and the intensity of the disguise differ. Among them; the purple sunbird and the loten's sunbird are almost identical in placing the nest, when possible, among spider webs to camouflage, while the purple-rumped sunbird does not do so. Urbanization does not deter the birds. Rather, those pairs that could not find vacant sites in the wild environment might spill over there for breeding purpose.

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**BIRD ACTIVITY IN PUTTUR.** MRS. PRAGATI NAYAK, "Aashirwad" Sampe, Post Aryapu, Puttur 574 210, Karnataka

It is a long time since I have written to you. Last year I completed the Home Study Course in Ornithology conducted by Rishi Valley School. I enjoyed it thoroughly — it was all very interesting and fascinating. After that I was busy with various family matters and was not able to write to you.

Let me tell you about some bird activity I noticed this summer. One April evening, I was walking about in our backyard and stopped under a mango tree to watch a racket-tailed drongo hunting near the fence. Suddenly a male magpie-robin darted in front of my eyes and landed on the fence. It rose again and I heard a "thwack" sound. The hairs on my arms stood on end when I saw what it was hitting — a huge brown snake! The snake was quite long — about six to eight feet and about five centimeters thick. Though I have been living in the country for the past fourteen years or so, I am not good at identifying snakes. All I know is that it wasn't a cobra because it did not have a hood. It was most probably a rat snake — they are very common around here. Anyway, the bird attacked it again and again. It would fly close to the snake and

jab it while still in flight and land on the other side. On several occasions, the snake raised its head and tried to strike the bird but it was too quick. The magpie-robin kept jabbing it — thwack, thwack! In spite of being bothered by the bird, the snake moved around the tree, exploring different branches and forks, poking its head in here and there and slithering in and out of various holes. At one point, a garden lizard on the tree was chased for a short distance by the snake. Finally, after about ten minutes, the snake dropped to the ground on a pile of dried palm fronds. The bird continued to jab it, I was amazed at the pluck of the bird taking on an animal so much bigger than itself.

After about a month, I was sitting at my desk, writing. The desk is at a window which overlooks the side of the garden and the garden wall. A male magpie-robin began to jump around the wall, calling "hsss hsss" and cocking its tail. It was behaving in a very agitated manner. It hopped about on the wall, obviously looking at something on the other side of the wall, calling "hsss hsss" excitedly all the while. I watched the wall intently. First the head appeared and then the rest of the snake came into view as it slithered up the wall. In exactly the same manner as before, the bird began to attack the snake. This snake was yellowish-brown with a pale belly and it was least bothered by the jabs the magpie-robin inflicted on it. It continued its way along the wall seemingly unaware of the bird. About twenty metres from that spot on the wall hangs the nest-box on a guava tree where a couple of magpie-robins were nesting then. If this bird was protecting its young in the nest-box, I think it was rather overprotective. How could a snake be aware of nestlings in a box so far away? May be there was another nest closer by.

The snake left the wall and started climbing a plant on the other side of the wall. Immediately, the magpie-robin lost interest and watched the snake quietly and without protest! Small flower-peckers and tailor-birds who had been foraging nearby, began to twitter and chirp, but did not attack the snake in any way. The snake climbed higher and higher but the stem of the plant it was climbing was weak and could not bear its weight. The plant began to bend and sway dangerously until the snake lost its balance and fell with a crash onto the dried undergrowth. It did not reappear and the birds stopped their twittering after a while.

When I first witnessed the spectacle of a magpie-robin attacking a snake I thought I had chanced upon a rare event. I hardly expected to be treated to the same sight within a few weeks.

I have a small suggestion to make about the Newsletter. All over your magazine there are tiny illustrations of birds. They are all very good but I cannot identify some of them sometimes and I am sure many amateur bird-watchers like me have the same problem. Perhaps it would be a good idea to write the bird's name under each drawing.



**HOUSE SPARROWS VANISHING.** SHARMILA CHAVALY, Avanti, 8-2-677/B/3, Rd No 12, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500 034

Earlier, the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad had a large population of the common or house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*?). I returned to Hyderabad four years ago after a five-year gap and found that they have completely disappeared. Other residents with whom I have checked have

confirmed this. All the other species (crows, crow-pheasants, bulbuls, pigeons, parakeets, etc.) which used to abound are still easily spotted.

Would you be able to tell me whether this is a localized phenomenon and what could have wiped out the sparrows? If you have no information on this, is there someone else who can explain it?



**WEB OF DEATH.** SANJAY B SHEGAONKAR, Ancheleshwar Ward, Shivaji Couk, Chandrapur 442 402

It was a second day of our Nature Education Camp at Tadoba — Andheri Tiger reserve from 24th to 26th Oct 1998. It was a cloudy and chilly morning. I and 15 other campers with me left the Youth Hostel at 6 am and marched towards Vasant Bandhara. We crossed the VIP Guest House about 1/2 km away from our Guest House. On the roadside bamboo undergrowth, we saw 10-12 plain wren-warblers (*Prinia subflava*) jumping from one twig to the other. When we were about 15 feet away from them, the whole party flew towards a thick bamboo. All went safely to the bamboo but one of them was found entangled in the Web. Due to the continuous cries and vigorous activity of the bird, our attention was drawn towards it. We saw that about a 1 to 1 1/2 inch bodied Giant Wood-Spider (*Nephile maculata*) was resting on the right hand corner of the web. With the vibration of the web, the spider slowly and



steadily walked towards the prey. The bird was trying to escape but when trying to remove itself from the web, it got more and more entangled. The web fibre ultimately wrapped it completely. As the spider came closer and closer, the cries became louder and louder. First the spider touched it with its front foot. The bird tried to escape but could not. Then the spider pierced his jaws on the right shoulder of the bird. The bird cried piteously and tried to bite the spider. For a few seconds the position was the same but we felt the activity of the bird was slightly slowing down. The spider went ahead and pierced his jaws exactly behind the neck. This time the sound of the bird was deeper and it was not trying to escape. After some seconds the bird was trying to take a deep breath with

a jerk. We realised that the game of the bird was about to end. This whole drama took about 20 minutes. I was about 10 feet away from the web and captured the incident with my camera (Cosina 35 ± 70 mm).



**SPOTTED GREY CREEPER (*SALPORNIS SPILONOTUS*).**  
DR RAJIV SAXENA, MIG-853, Darpan Colony, Thatipr,  
Gwalior 474 011 (MP)

Spotted grey creeper is found in Central Indian Peninsula from Gurgaon (Haryana) east to Manbhum, south to Godavari river west to Surat Dangs. Patchily distributed but not uncommon locally (Ali, 1996). It is also found in Africa from Congo and Angola east to Sudan, and East Africa (Ripley, 1982).

Its subspecies *rajputanae* has upper parts greyer than in the nominate subspecies *spilonotus* and underparts not heavily marked (Abdulali and Unnithan, 1992).

In the morning of 30 Jan 1999, it was sighted in a fruit tree garden (mainly mango trees) in the Purani Chhawani area about 8 km north of Gwalior along Agra-Bombay highway in north west Madhya Pradesh.

There were two birds but their activities showed that it was not a pair. One of them settled on the main trunk for a few seconds, then crept upwards and sideways to pick something from the crevices in the bark with its diagnostic, comparatively large curved bill. It moved from tree to tree to repeat the same activity. The other flew from tree to tree and intermittently disappeared out of the grove to reappear again. But neither followed the other.

I have scanned the reports of bird surveys and checklists covering its distribution range for nearly 20 years in the literature available with me. I do not find a single mention of this bird. This is a species to look for in future.

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**PLAYFUL BEHAVIOUR BY LARGE GREY BABBLER *TURDOIDES MALCOLMI*.** ASAD R RAHMANI, Bombay Natural History Society, Dr. Salim Ali Chowk, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Road, Mumbai 400 023

The large grey babbler *Turdoides malcolmi* is a common bird in Aligarh district, generally found in flocks consisting 10-15 birds. On 5th April 1997, I saw an interesting behaviour which I can call only as 'play'. At about 14.00 h, a flock was desultorily foraging in a harvested crop field beside Aligarh-Delhi highway. On both sides of the road were roadside

plantations of Shishum *Dalbergia sissoo*, Neem *Azadirachta indica* and Babool *Acacia nilotica*. A kutch road was present where I was sitting watching the antics of these birds. Three birds flew and settled touching each other on the ground with loose soil. After a few seconds two more birds, and then one bird, joined them and sat very close to one another, almost like a bundle of feathers. This went on for 3-4 minutes. Each bird was trying to snuggle close to the other birds. After jumping, the bird would come in the middle, but soon its place would be taken up by another bird who would make a short jump over its companion(s). The birds appeared to be enjoying each other's company. Soon the birds became excited by something and all flew in one direction. I counted 19 babblers in the flock but only 6 birds took part in this playful behaviour, the rest were busy foraging. First I thought the babblers have settled on the soft ground for sunbathing but the light was not falling where the birds had settled. No allo-preening, quite common in babblers, was seen. So it appears, the birds were just playing with each other.



**SULTAN TIT: SOME COMMENTS.** S KARTHIKEYAN, 24, Opp Banashankari Temple, Shakambarinagar, 8th Block Jayanagar, P.O., Bangalore 560 082

The following are some comments in response to the note titled "The Sultan Tit" by Prof. HSA Yahya (NLBW 39(3) : 51) wherein he has commented on the note 'Missing Species Rediscovered at Kalimpong, North Bengal' by SJ Ghosh (NLBW, 39(1) : 11-12).

Mr. Ghosh in his note is referring to the Siberian blue chat *Erithacus cyane* which is known to be a straggler during winter migration. While Prof. Yahya is alluding to the sultan tit *Melanochlora sultanea* which is known to occur only in the Eastern Himalayas. He (Prof Yahya), surprisingly, seems to have confused himself between the two species.

It also came to me as a surprise to note that Prof Yahya has seen the Sultan tit *Melanochlora sultanea* — a species from Eastern Himalayas in south India. He says "....commonly recorded in Thanikudi area of Periyar Tiger Reserve ...".

Senior and reputed persons in this field like Prof. Yahya have to be more cautious while commenting on notes published by others. They should be all the more careful while publishing their 'sighting' of species like Sultan tit at Periyar. Such errors can have very different implications both for the avifauna and for the Newsletter as is rightly pointed out by Mr Lavkumar Khacher (NLBW, 39(3) : 49).



**SULTAN TIT IN KERALA.** PRAVEEN J, XIV/779(2), Ambadi, K Medu P.O., Palakkad, Kerala 678 013

I would like to comment on the note by Prof. HSA Yahya on Sultan tit (*Melanochlora sultanea*) in the correspondence section of NLBW, 39 : 51. He states it was '... commonly recorded in Thanikudi area of Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR) ... between 1978 and 1980' by him.

As far as the records go Ali & Ripley (1983) give its range as Eastern Himalayas. It does not find a place in the checklist of birds of Kerala given in 'A Book of Kerala Birds' (KK Neelakantan *et al.*) or in the more recent checklist given in the new edition of 'Keralathile Pakshikal' (Induchoodan (KKN)). Robertson & Jackson in their book 'Birds of Periyar' records grey tit as common around Kumali ghat and yellow cheeked tit as only 'sporadically reported' from Thekkady. They however give no mention of the sultan tit. So this note by Yahya might well be the first report from Kerala if not from Western Ghats as well as from South India. Hence, it might be worthwhile if Yahya would kindly provide the details of 'all the sightings' of this bird from Thanikudi, PTR.



**NECTAR SEEKING WOODPECKER.** LIMA ROSALIND, Programme Officer, Centre for Environment Education, Nehru Foundation for Development, Thaltej Tekra, Ahmedabad 380 054

On the morning of 20th August at 07.30 hrs sitting in the lawns of the guest house in the periphery of the Balaram-Ambaji Wild Life Sanctuary. I spotted the yellowfronted pied or Mahratta woodpecker (*Picoides maharattensis*) land on a canna bush. The male climbed upward to the flowers pecked at the base of the flower to get to the nectar and dislodged the flowers in the process. The bird continued thus and dislodged several flowers in the process. On closer examination of the flowers the bulbous base did have many peck marks indicating that the bird did want to get to the nectar.

Ali Ripley (1983) in their description of the food for the species do include nectar too as one of its items. This is a new revealing observation for me in all my 12 years of birdwatching and I want to share this with the readers of Newsletter for Bird Watchers.



**VIVID MEMORIES.** WILLIAM C. SELOVER, 1257, Union Street, San Francisco, California 94109

I was also very pleased to see the recent issue of the Newsletter, particularly your Kihim Diary. I'm impressed with the colour photograph, the glossy paper, the nice typeface, the readable graphics. I found an old issue in my files which contains the article, "A Birdwatching Outing in Rajkot," by K.S. Lavkumar and myself. This was the May 1963 issue. It also contained a book review of the Collins' *Guide to Birdwatching* by Laeeq, in which she wrote: "The present volume has a wider objective. It is nothing less than to turn a complete ignoramus into a complete birdwatchers." I can say that my joint effort with Lavkumar resulted in making me - a complete ignoramus - into only a slightly less complete ignoramus. But the outing in Rajkot remains a vivid memory for me. Perhaps I could do a little note for the anniversary issue, as you suggested.



## Peregrinations in the sky

MARK COCKER

The marshes at Titchwell, Norfolk, belonging to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, are probably the most heavily visited nature reserve in Britain. Each weekend its footpaths bear an endless procession of birdwatchers. So when we visited recently it seemed a piece of careful theatrical management by the owners to have a pair of peregrines performing just above the reserve.

The birds swooped in long, powerful arcs to intimidate a rival predator, a hunting hen harrier, before widening the scope of their aerial circuits. As they did so, they transmitted shock-waves of alarm to thousands of wildfowl and waders feeding on the marshes. Soon huge wheeling bird-clouds banked and twisted in response to each falcon's movements and if one of them came close the flocks atomised instantly in a convulsion of panic.

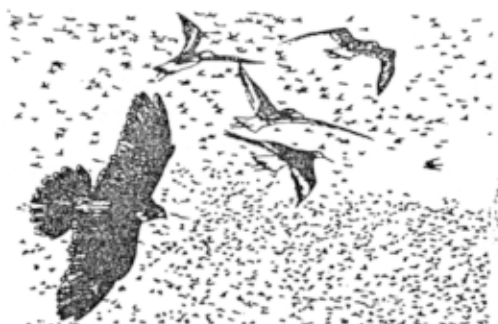
It's not difficult to see why this bird was a potent symbol for different cultures over the millennia. For the ancient Egyptians their sky god, Horus, and his living embodiment, the Pharaoh, were depicted as falcon-headed beings. In classical Greece and Rome a falcon deity resurfaced in the form of Apollo. More recently the bird has become a symbol of our desecration of the environment. As an acute victim of agricultural pesticides, its fate seemed an apt metaphor for industrial society's slow poisoning of the planet. Environmentalists also developed a parallel symbolism, arguing that since it was a predator at the top of the food chain, the falcon's improving fortunes would mirror a wider environmental improvement.

Over the past 25 years the peregrine's lot has certainly improved. In North America it is now a regular resident of inner-city areas; in Britain its population is probably more numerous than at any time since the beginning of last century, while Europe-wide its numbers are stable or increasing in 16 countries.

Yet in Britain the peregrine's rising star has been symbolic only to the extent that it has reflected a general increase in several other birds of prey. But in watching the fortunes of our top predators, ironically, we seemed to lose sight of their regular avian victims - the formerly common farmland birds such as partridges, turtle doves, thrushes, blackbirds, skylarks, several finches, even sparrows and starlings, which are all now in long-term decline.

Closer scrutiny reveals why the peregrine failed as a metaphor for this wider picture. The measures that led to its recovery were a specific ban on organochlorine pesticides and a reduction in deliberate persecution.

But in the wider countryside the engine of change has been far more complicated, involving a general farming modernisation coupled with financial incentives provided by



the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy. The CAP delivers about \$65 billion to farmers across the EU, resulting in many practices that are destructive to wildlife. In upland areas subsidies on sheep have led to widespread over-stocking and over-grazing. In the lowland arable regions subsidies paid according to area have led to intensified farming and massive over-production of cereals.

It's now thought the only way to halt the decline of farmland birds (British grey partridges, corn buntings and tree sparrows have slumped, for example, by 80-90 per cent) is to make payments conditional upon good environmental practices. But the politics of the EU have the manoeuvrability of a super-tanker. The earliest date for real reform of the CAP is 2005. By then things should still be looking good for the peregrine, but in the meantime the clock is ticking for Britain's sparrows and starlings.

Courtesy, Guardian Weekly, June 6, 1999



**PAINTED STORKS FLY OVER GKVK CAMPUS, BANGALORE.** S. SRIDHAR and DR. A.K. CHAKRAVARTHY, Birdwatchers' Field Club of Bangalore, No. 10, Sirur Park, 'B' Street, Seshadripuram, Bangalore 560 020

On 2nd July 1999, at about 11 a.m. when we were on the road leading to the dryland farming section of GKVK (Gandhi Krishi Vigyana Kendra) Campus, University of Agricultural Sciences, Bangalore, we noticed a flock of 34 painted storks (*Mycteria leucocephala*) flying over the campus. The flock was apparently flying from the Jakkur lake and were seen moving towards Kodigehalli Tank. This flock was followed by another flock of four painted storks, which also moved in the same direction. Flyovers of painted storks were regularly sighted from July 1999 at Yediyur (Tumkur) and Madenur (Hassan) in flocks of 12 to 16 and the wetlands around these places formed feeding grounds for the birds.

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Cover : Bar-headed Geese (*Anser indicus*) Breed in the high mountains of Tibet, Central Asia (from Tien shan to Koknour) and Ladakh. During winter they migrate to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Burma and Bhutan. The population of this species is estimated to be in the region of about 50,000 birds and has been suggested to be a likely candidate for the list of globally threatened species.

Photo : S. Sridhar, ARPS